

# Bigness is the Enemy of Humanity

Local Government and Local Democracy

Michael Young

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'... it will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details and be interested in them; individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life onto the shoulders of an abstraction called the State but must deal with each other.'

*William Morris,*  
COMMONWEAL, 1889

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'Bigness is the enemy of humanity.'

*Aneurin Bevan,*  
HOUSE OF COMMONS  
24 NOVEMBER 1947

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'There must be more decentralisation of decision making in industry and government, together with an effective and practical system of democracy at work.'

THE LIMEHOUSE DECLARATION, 1981

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- 6 Under the first of these Acts Mr Heseltine has elevated himself to an extraordinary stature. Here is just one passage from one of his many Gilbertian speeches in the House of Commons. He said on 15 December 1980 that his Housing Act left local authorities with the responsibility for determining their own rents – fancy! – but the new subsidy system in his own Act ‘requires me to determine the annual amount to be taken into account as the local contribution in calculating subsidy entitlement’. He goes on

‘Following my consultation with the local authority associations, I have now decided to set the increase in the local contribution at £2.95 per dwelling per week for 1981-82.’

Chadwick, are you stirring happily in your grave? You have an heir.

The Heseltine rent increases have come at a time when the number of housing starts has plummeted to a record low, more and more publicly owned houses are going into disrepair for lack of money (10 per cent of London’s own housing has been classified as unfit for human habitation) and waiting lists for council houses are increasing steadily. The outlook for younger people wanting a house has never been bleaker.

### **Nationalising local government**

Mr Heseltine’s new Bills are perhaps the most centralising measures that have ever come out of Parliament. An administration nominally committed to less government has made itself more, not less powerful. In 1979 a review of statutory central controls took up 189 pages; the 1980 Act left most of these controls untouched while inventing several new ones.\* The government has gone far to nationalise local government by acquiring more control over what local councils can spend. This has been used with quite blatant prejudice to discriminate against inner city areas which are already in grave decline. Hardly a single Tory back-bencher came out in his support. Anthony Beaumont-Dark (Con, Selly Oak) said ‘It is unique to have a Bill on which all local government associations, of whatever complexion, are sensibly united

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\**Review of Central Government Controls over Local Authorities*, Association of Metropolitan Authorities, Association of County Councils and Association of District Councils, 1979.



against the Government's measures. It is also unique that no one outside the Government has spoken up for the Bill'. 7

In concentrating more and more power in London Michael Heseltine is following in the footsteps of his colleague, Peter Walker, who opened the previous decade with the Conservatives' disastrous local government 'reform'. This was followed by the almost equally catastrophic 'reform' of the National Health Service which Sir Keith Joseph has engagingly never stopped blaming himself for. But in the mid-70s, did the Labour Government strike a blow for local democracy? Not at all. It nibbled where the Conservatives have bitten, without showing much greater respect for the right of local people to decide what they want for themselves. Just as the Conservatives in office railed against Labour councils which opposed the sale of council houses so did Labour rail against Conservatives who would not move quickly enough on comprehensive schools. The kettle is always calling the pot black while intending to go still further up the spout. Some members of the Labour Party are now suggesting that responsibility for paying teachers should be taken out of local government.

Ever since the two modern parties edged out the Liberals, the central state has been steadily paring away at local independence. As David Owen has said of local government

'By 1902 it was providing housing, sanitary services, police, road repairs and education, and some authorities were running train and bus services, providing water, gas, electricity, libraries, public entertainments, and owned docks and other municipal enterprises. Public health extended to municipal hospitals and covered maternity, child welfare and the mentally handicapped. Local government was even given responsibility for the unemployed until the Unemployment Assistance Board was formed in 1934. After the Boer War, during the years from 1904-1914 with the exception of 1912-1913, local government actually spent more than central government; today central government spends nearly twice as much.'

*Face The Future*, p.356-7

Until 1981 there has been no effective check upon the ruthless centralising drive of the two government parties. Whether there is now to be such a check depends upon the new Social Democrats.

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## Social Democratic Stance

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- 8 It is too early for the new Party to take the field in full force at the forthcoming County Council elections which are to occur in England and Wales on 7 May 1981. By then the party will have been in existence for less than two months. The Social Democrats will endorse no official candidates in these local elections. The hour for full engagement in local government will come later. But this is not to say that members and supporters of the new party should stand back and do nothing as though local government were no concern of theirs, when it most emphatically is. There are two steps which can be taken.

The first is to start upon a full local survey of the 'condition of Britain' as it is exemplified in your area, including the area covered by your parish, district or borough council as well as that of the county council, whether it be a metropolitan or a shire county or the GLC. The new party will eventually have to make itself effective at both local and national levels. The sorry state of all the present public services – slashed as they have been under orders from Mr Michael Heseltine – should be evaluated and the main needs for future development assessed. It will have to be done against the background of the local economy, the plight of the unemployed and the incidence of poverty. This sort of survey will be the necessary basis for a genuinely local programme responsive to local needs. The election period up to 7 May will provide a chance to start gathering information and sizing up (even for signing up) some of the opposition.

The second step is to put questions to candidates of the other parties and to independents. The right questions to ask will depend upon the locality. Every county council and each area within it have their own special circumstances. What is an issue in one place will not necessarily be so in another. But in addition to local matters there are certain general issues on which candidates can also be quizzed. To begin with, when the first Social Democrats stand in local elections, it will be within the framework of local government practice as it is, not as we should like it to be. But we can still make it as clear as we can that we want a general decentralisation, from central to local government, and that this will only happen when Social Democrats are in the government at the national as well as at local levels.

### **The heave needed**

In questioning candidates this time around we have to accept that the task the new party has set itself is as large as it is necessary. A lot of damage has been done and we have to start from where we are, not from where we would like



to be. There will be no movement at all without a heave, and much of the initiative will have to come from the localities if anything worthwhile is to be accomplished. A groundswell of support is needed from every county and district; it is not too soon to start building it up. Every candidate from the other parties is a potential member who may be won for the new one. Establish that it means to be genuinely radical, secure the support of people in the other parties, ensure that large issues are discussed as well as small, and a start will have been made down the road to the first reform of the century which springs from Townhall instead of Whitehall. The questions need to go wider than are usually raised in local campaigns because the issues go deeper and affect the nation as well as every locality within it. I recognise, of course, that I have not within the compass of a pamphlet covered the whole range of subjects that are embraced by local government nor the profound difference that it will make to local authorities when proportional representation is introduced for local elections, as it already has been in Northern Ireland. I have chosen examples only.

The first questions I would put to candidates would be about the measures to which I have already referred. *Do you approve of the new Local Government Act?* is a question which needs to be put generally. Labour and Liberal will have no difficulty in answering. Most Conservatives will not find it so easy. Also, *What have the main effects been so far of this Act on the County?* The answers could be useful for the record and against the day when there will be a field of Social Democrat candidates. In cities like Edinburgh, Cardiff, Bristol, Nottingham, Southampton, Hull, Leicester, Stoke, Derby, which were almost obliterated (or left obliterated) as local government entities by Conservatives and Labour alike, the question should be raised whether candidates are in favour of *restoring their powers and freedoms as they had survived for a century up till the 1970s though poor central areas must not be left deserted by rich suburbs.*

Just seven other issues are now mentioned; they are not the only ones that will figure in the eventual reform. But they are all issues that matter.

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## 1. Local Income Tax

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- 10 None more so than finance. The present government belongs to a long series of Labour and Conservative governments which have been able to impose their will on local authorities for the simple (and hard) reason that they controlled the purse. Local democracy will never amount to anything until one crucial condition is met – locally elected people must have much more power over their own money than at any time since the war. The Layfield Report on Local Government Finance (HMSO, 1976) concluded that 'financial pressures seem to have been critical in tipping the balance of the forces towards the centre', and 'that the key to these questions lies in the weakening of local accountability brought about by . . . the tendency for government grants to grow as compared with the contribution from local taxation, and the natural concern of the government with the total of local government expenditure' (p.72). The national treasury doles out money and then seeks to call the tune. The consequence is that local councillors are controlled at every turn. Almost 20% of their money goes on interest on the loans which central government allows them to borrow. Over 65% of their spending goes on paying their own staffs according to centrally negotiated scales.

Governments have been able to hold local authorities in thrall by their adamant refusal to do anything about the outdated form of local tax upon which they are dependent – this although when they are in opposition spokesmen of each government party merrily declaim against rates. Before he was in office Mr Heseltine was against them. In office what is he? Different anyway. The fact is that local authorities have been weakened by the same double-bind refusal by both parties to reform the archaic rating system, just as they've refused to tackle the constitutional reform of another archaic institution, the House of Lords. Because local authorities have no defensible tax base of their own, they cannot escape from the ever-present and grotesquely minute control exercised by the central government; which the two old parties have only wished to do when they are enjoying the abandon of being in opposition.

### A medieval tax

Rates were not exactly a popular tax in Layfield's time, or (should I say) even less so than other taxes. The report criticised them because they were so arbitrary in their incidence. Some poor people pay a large proportion of their income in rates, some rich people a small. Many people, including many wage-earners who are not householders, do not directly pay any rates at all. Even though rate rebates have removed some of the worst injustice, the



whole system is based on the notional rental values of property which have no relation to any rents that people do or might pay. 11

Since then rates have become a great deal more unpopular still. Any candidate ready to laud the virtues of rates in present-day circumstances should be hailed either for his bravado or his stupidity.

Layfield urged the Labour government (without necessarily abandoning rates altogether) to look at the alternative of a local income tax.\* Did the government do any such thing? Of course not. It did not want to surrender any of its power. The new party can take the advice because it is committed to as much decentralisation as possible. Allow local authorities to raise taxes which are as much defensible at the local as they are at the national level and they would then be a good deal more independent than they are now.

A local income tax levied according to where people live would also serve another main aim of the new party, socialist as it is, namely to achieve a greater measure of equality. It would be a progressive tax, with the rich paying a higher proportion of their incomes to the local authority than the poor. A local income tax appears to work well in Canada, Finland, Norway, Italy, Sweden and parts of the USA; there is no reason why it should not do so here. This is not to say that central government grants should be done away with completely. They are needed if for no other reason than to equalise revenues between richer and poorer districts. Many administrative and other problems are also reviewed in the Layfield Report. But it is difficult to see how the principle of local responsibility can be honoured unless local authorities become financially less dependent upon the central government. This cannot be achieved unless they have an acceptable source of taxation of their own. In Layfield's words, 'A local tax on all personal incomes, the rate being set by the local authorities, is the only feasible major new source of income meriting further investigation' (p.209).

I hope some of the candidates approached will be startled to be asked for their views on the whole system of local taxation. They may not have any. All the same, there is no harm in *asking if they approve of rates as a form of local taxation*. Ask them, if they don't, *what sort of local taxes they would prefer*, and on from that, *for their views on a possible local income tax*.

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\*The case has again been made in a recent study which is too expensive to be consulted except in a library that has not been so much cut down by the bashaw that it can still afford to buy books. *Local Government Finance in a Unitary State*, C. D. Foster, R. Jackman and M. Perlman, Allen & Unwin.

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## 2. Education

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- 12 At the Department of Education and Science Mr Mark Carlisle has been Mr Heseltine's able lieutenant, ready soon for promotion to captain. He has won his lady's favour by proving himself an accomplished centraliser and cutter, with grave consequences for the quality of education that he pretends not to think grave at all. Lady David, Labour's spokesman in the House of Lords, referred to the Carlisle policy as one of 'slow strangulation'. In higher education, which in the era of Rhodes Boyson is being cut most savagely, it is not to be so slow. All is to be ground down except the private schools; these are to gain from the outrageous assisted places scheme.

As for other schools, a recent report by Her Majesty's Inspectors\*, still showing something of their magnificent independence, has chronicled some of the damage done by bashaw No. 2 (if now I make the very singular plural). The number of teachers has been cut at a period when falling rolls would have allowed the size of classes to be reduced if only the number had been maintained. There are fewer specialist teachers, more temporary staff in some departments, including major ones like English. Remedial classes have suffered. Probationers have been under greater pressure than ever. There has been less money for books and equipment – 'there was frequent reference to the use of outworn and out-dated books in primary and in secondary schools and to shortages in secondary schools which resulted in sharing textbooks in class and the curtailment of homework'.\* More charges have been introduced. Maintenance of buildings has been cut down everywhere. Even 'newer postwar buildings were increasingly mentioned as having untreated and rotting wood frames and leaking roofs'.\* No doubt the government would rather build prisons than schools.

When the time comes action will have to be taken to make good as much of the damage as possible and to launch out again on expansion. But this does not need to be done within the same party-honoured framework as at present. The issue needs to be raised about each and every service – none more so than education – whether there can be further devolution down from the local authority. The lower the level at which decisions can sensibly be taken, the better. Better by a local authority than a national; better at a community level than by a local authority.

### Let governors govern

In this context it means that more should be decided in the school and less by

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\*Report by HMI on the Effects on the Education Service in England of Local Authority Expenditure Policies – Financial Year 1980-81.



the local education authority. The Taylor Committee on school government (which was appointed in 1975) recommended that the governing body for each school should be an equal partnership of LEA, staff, parents and community – and, I would add, pupils as far as secondary schools are concerned. The governors should have responsibility delegated from the LEA for the overall success of the school in all aspects of its life and work, for staff appointments and for curricular objectives and for budgeting. The last Labour Government made a start on these lines against a good deal of opposition. As for the Conservatives they promised as much to parents before the Election as they have done little since. They are not even pressing for the parent-governors which were provided for in their own woeful Education Act of 1980. 13

Parents and pupils should not only have more say in the way existing schools should be governed. They should also have more choice generally, which they cannot have while all the schools on offer are basically the same. Fortunately, the long struggle to create comprehensive schools is now almost over and there can be no going back to selective schools which give choice to a minority only by taking it away from a majority. But for all their virtues, comprehensives also have faults. The outstanding one is that they are so much like each other.

There is, in other words, not nearly as much diversity *within* the comprehensive system as people wish. 'Alternative' comprehensives are needed in cities so that more people will have more choice between schools which offer genuinely different regimes. Some could be 'free schools' in which children would be encouraged to make their own decisions, set their own goals and express themselves. Others could be vocational schools which would, as well as teaching the basic subjects, concentrate on preparing children for the world of work. Others could be arts schools for children talented in music, drama, dancing or painting.

This sort of choice between schools could only be offered in urban areas. Distance would not allow it in rural areas. In most places, including cities, another option would be to set up several mini-schools following different regimes within the larger framework of an existing school, and parents and pupils given more choice between one mini-school and another. This would, by creating smaller 'schools' *within* the larger, have the additional advantage that the greatest weakness of many comprehensive schools, their sheer bigness,

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\**The School in Its Setting*, Joan Sallis, Advisory Centre for Education, 18 Victoria Park Square, London E2. £1.

- 14 would be offset. Mr Carlisle wants a nationally agreed core curriculum' so that Ministers may 'satisfy themselves that the work of the schools matches national needs'. Mr Carlisle can go the way of other centralisers. It is parents and pupils, not just teachers, who need to satisfy themselves that their local school satisfies their needs.

So, as well as putting questions to candidates about special local issues in your own county, they can also be asked *whether they are in favour of much more devolution of power to governors of primary and secondary schools; and what they intend to do to enlarge choice within the comprehensive system for parents and pupils.*



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### 3. Housing

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Some of the candidates approached for their views on housing may object that in 1981 they are standing for counties, not for the district councils which have the housing powers. But it can be stressed once again that they are being asked to state their position on the relations between local and central government, and, that being so, housing cannot be left out. The sad decline in public housing has already been remarked, and so the first question to put is *whether their parties wish to halt and reverse this decline, and if so how. Linked with this, they could be asked whether they consider that local authorities should be compelled to sell off council houses without regard to local circumstances.* 15

The administration of housing also matters a great deal, and in this sphere there is scope for delegation and contracting out of the functions of housing departments. Non-profit bodies like co-operatives should be entrusted with responsibilities that have previously belonged to authorities themselves.

The issue arises with any service, and none more so than with housing. Municipal bureaucracy has often lain heavily on council tenants. Until recently the Kingston-upon-Hull Council, in its agreement with tenants, enjoined them to 'see that the Water Closet is kept clean'; Hambleton required them not to 'use the premises for immoral or disorderly purposes'; Plymouth that they should not indulge in the 'placing in the w.c. of rags, cotton, bottles or anything likely to choke it or the drain'; while North Dorset provided that 'the tenant shall see that the bath is used only for the purpose for which it is intended'.

Instead of this Chadwickian hectoring, tenants should be encouraged to manage their affairs themselves. This can be done through tenants' associations. It can also be done through tenant management co-operatives. If they receive the same proportion of the rent that the council would spend upon repair and maintenance they can take on the responsibility themselves for spending it to the best effect, employing their own staff for the purpose.

The question to ask of candidates is *whether they believe in the need for more tenant involvement.* Beyond that, and more generally, they should be asked *whether they are ready to consider entrusting non-profit voluntary bodies and co-operatives with any of the council's functions, not just in housing, and if so which functions?*

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## 4. Transport

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- 16 If Britain were a completely motorised nation the roads in our towns and cities would be completely blocked. Cars and lorries would stand end to end, motionless, and a strange silence would descend, broken only now and then by soft cries of drivers who had nowhere to drive except into the back of the car in front of them. No Metros would sing, no Escorts sting.

We are a little way from that. Not everyone has a car and not everyone who has uses it continuously. All the same, we are moving steadily towards complete paralysis. The number of cars increases. Fewer people travel by bus and train. Public transport deteriorates. More people have to travel by car, and down it all tumbles in a vicious spiral. The worst victims of the rush into private cars are the many poorer people who do not have one at all and rural areas generally where people without cars are often cut off from a whole range of services. Poorer people depend on public transport and, if that stops, they have nothing. The prospect is that our urban and in a different way our rural environment will be stricken by a sort of social polio unless action is taken, and there is only one sort of action that will make a crucial difference – the improvement of public transport.

This is in part a matter for British Rail. Perhaps there is some hope that even the government we have now – throw-back as it is to the days of Sir Edwin Chadwick – will agree to the demand from Sir Peter Parker for the capital needed to electrify the railways and may even desist from making it necessary to close still more of the branch lines which matter so much to so many local authorities.

The improvement in public transport is also a matter for local authorities, and, they cannot do anything effective to make use of the recent and welcome deregulation of bus and other transport without more resources at their command. Give them that, and they could begin to stem the vicious downwards spiral and attract people back from cars to buses and trains. The question would then be what to do first. *Use school buses for many other purposes as well? Arrange that more postvans should be postbuses as well? Introduce more travel cards so that people in cities could go anywhere they liked within zones, in and out of cities, without having to pay for each journey? Increase the frequency of services with smaller buses? Encourage the local authority to make use of more minibuses for many different community purposes?* Any candidate who does not have his own views on these and other questions to do with public transport is not worth his seat in the bus.



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## 5. Restoring Services to Local Government

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We cannot blame previous Labour or Tory administrations for having raided local government unless we intend to do our best to restore what has been taken away. With gas and electricity that is no longer wholly possible. Gas comes from the North Sea and that cannot be moved into any local authority. The grid for electricity and its generating stations are part of a national system. This cannot now be dismantled. But local authorities could have responsibility for distribution of electricity and gas. And, still to do with energy, there are large new opportunities presented for local initiative. Every local authority should have its own energy department devoted to the improvement of insulation and conservation in public buildings and in the homes of old people and others. There is also much scope for small as well as large schemes for the harnessing of local sources of renewable energy from the sun, water and wind. These are new and important jobs to be done by every local authority, with the object of making its area somewhat less dependent upon the fossil fuels. These local efforts will also generate local employment. 17

The health services are another matter. They have been organised, reorganised and disorganised by one palsied government after another, but always to a large scale. David Owen has suggested that reform has failed, because those responsible 'have refused to confront the real dilemma: decentralisation or continued centralisation. Local control has been fudged at every decision point and the result has been an uneasy and often unworkable compromise with a state which is already the most centralised of all Western industrialised democracies'.<sup>\*</sup> That process needs to be reversed. As a first step the local Community Health Councils could become elected bodies and be given powers that would make them more than just a sop to local democracy. After that the elected local authorities of the future might take over, and become responsible again for the preventive health services, for cottage and other small hospitals and for local clinics.

The main question to ask under this head is *whether candidates are in favour of the transfer of health and other services from central to local government, and if so which services?*

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<sup>\*</sup>'Reflections on the Royal Commission', The Trevor Lloyd Hughes Memorial Lecture. Quoted R. McAllister and D. Hunter, *Local Government: Death or Devolution*, Outer Circle Policy Unit, 1980.

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## 6. Unemployment

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- 18 If the new party wins not just in some local elections to come after 1981 but in the General Election, it will inherit appalling economic problems, of which unemployment will be the most grievous. Decentralist though the new party will be, dealing with this problem will be primarily a matter for the central government.

Local authorities should be able to help as well; indeed they should be given a specific power to do all they can to reduce unemployment in their area. They should look at every single local service to see how it could employ more of the people who are at present out of work without increasing local expenditure and without reducing efficiency – as education could if, for instance, every governing body was allowed to spend on extra staff and books money saved on energy in its school. Domiciliary services for elderly people, the disabled and the sick are often more humane, and properly developed would be more labour-intensive, than institutions. New workshop and factory buildings are also needed, and local authorities can provide more of them whether in conjunction with the Development Commission or not, just as they can prepare sites for building contractors.

Local authorities will, of course, need backing from the centre, for instance in the manner in which unemployment benefit is dealt with. At present the government forces people to be idle before they can draw any benefit. In France, on the other hand, people made redundant can collect six months' unemployment benefit in advance and put it into a co-operative or other new business as starter capital. On the strength of this measure 20 new worker co-operatives were started in France between 1 January and the middle of March 1981; and many more are on the way. It would help even more if the Manpower Services Commission, vital as its role is, would cease to be merely a national department. Some of its money should be channelled into the new employment projects to be promoted by local councils. The issue of unemployment is clearly of the greatest importance everywhere and candidates should be asked *what they consider should be done about it by their particular local authority*.



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## 7. Size of Authority

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One of the many great opportunities lost by the Conservative reform of the early 1970s was to do something about the very localness of local authorities. Instead of making things smaller they made them bigger. This was as much a pity then as it is a pity now; for it is a commonplace (although not so much one as to be overlooked by the Conservatives) that the smaller the area of the authority, the greater the interest taken in it by local inhabitants. This was demonstrated by a survey done for the Redcliffe Maud Commission which preceded the reform. It showed that more than three-quarters of a national sample of electors were conscious of living in a very small local community called the 'home area'. In small towns with a population of under 30,000 many people thought of the whole town as the home area; even more thought like that about the rural parish. With other kinds of local government there was little correspondence between the community to which people thought they belonged and the area of the local authority which nominally represented them. 'In urban authority areas, approximately three-quarters of electors define their "home" area as being of a size no larger than the equivalent of a ward; of these, the majority define its extent as being approximately the size of a group of streets or smaller.'

The finding was left hanging in the air. The case for urban parish councils (or neighbourhood councils) as the lowest tier of local government was made at the time by the Association of Neighbourhood Councils as well as by the Maud Commission, and then ignored just as was Layfield on local income tax. Scotland and Wales went some way towards such small councils, England no way at all, except for the police who are realising the value of neighbourhood bobbies. If the opportunity had been taken the whole of urban Britain could by now have a local democracy that people really cared about, feeling it to be their own. Neighbourhood councils would, however, have poor prospects unless they were given powers that mattered. Admittedly, there would then be consequences for other levels of local government as well.

But why not face them? This is not the place to consider again all the extremely complicated interlocking issues raised by a radical approach towards local government. But it is the time and place to urge that questions be put to candidates about the size of their local authorities. *Do they consider them too large or too small? Or (more likely, I fear) just right?*

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## Coda

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- 20 If the issues touched on in this pamphlet were simple, perhaps even the government parties would not have made such a mess of them in the years since 1945. They are indeed complicated. That is no excuse for not tackling them. Decentralisation is needed, with power moved away from the central to the local and from the big to the small. Local diversity and spontaneity is what we are after instead of uniformity, but always with the proper provision for redistribution of resources from richer to poorer districts.

Central government will remain essential, and firm government at that. The devilish twins of unemployment and inflation will never be tamed without a new direction and drive in the central government, and in European government, too, for that matter. It is, as usual, a question of balance, of seeking a different balance between central and local government, and without martinets in either Townhall or Whitehall. Whitehall has no monopoly of martinets. To raise such questions with local candidates may be somewhat startling to some of them. But it is fitting that members of a new party, determined to make of local authorities something more than agents of central government, should raise them right at the start. To act small it is necessary to think big. A painter is judged by the voids he leaves between the figures in his pictures; a poet by the silences between his words; the new politician will be judged by the space he leaves between central and local.



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